

Celebrating Special Days with a Loose Parts Mindset

by Carla Gull, Suzanne Levenson Goldstein, and Tricia Rosengarten

Celebrating and observing special days and seasons is an age-old way to connect with each other, the land, our families, and our communities. Gull et al. (2021) state “Adding loose parts celebrations in our classrooms can create and promote diversity, culture, and appreciation of nature, current events, and history.” In addition, when loose parts are added to the celebration mix, creativity, problem solving skills, and collaboration are enhanced. Building on home-school connections

for our celebrations allows parents to see firsthand how loose parts can be a powerful part of our students’ educational and play experiences. With a little imagination and creativity, you can plan celebratory events that strengthen your students, their families, and community (Gull et al., 2021).

Special Days to Celebrate

Explore loose parts-connected days to celebrate, host families at the school

as part of celebrations, and implement principles to help any loose parts celebration be a success in your setting. Celebratory days can spark special moments in the classroom and be shared with families. Examples include:

- International Artists Day (10/5)
- Outdoor Classroom Day (11/3)
- National Button Day (11/16)
- National Inventors Day (2/11)
- National Old Stuff Day (3/2)
- National Creativity Day (5/30)

Additional celebration ideas are listed in Chapter 15 of “Loose Parts Learning in K-3 Classrooms.” The podcast Loose Parts Nature Play (loosepartsnatureplay.libsyn.com), also has more in-depth ideas and commentary on many ways to celebrate with loose parts. Special days can also be found at: nationaldaycalendar.com.

Figure 1 shows a few ideas of holidays and celebrations, and examples of loose parts celebrations that could be explored in the classroom setting.



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Seasonal and Holiday Loose Parts Ideas

Seasonal loose parts options can be used as we transition throughout the year. One option is to consider the seasons in your area, making a chart for loose parts that may be found seasonally, such as snow and ice in winter, gourds and cornstalks in fall, and mud and water in the summer. Lean into these seasonal changes and make loose parts available in your setting.

In one setting, students and family collected autumn treasures in special bags with instructions for responsible collection. At preschool, students explored their items in small groups, sorted and categorized the items, and then could experiment with them. Many children made leaf creatures with them after reading the book “Leaf Man” by Lois Ehlert. The class then had a whole autumn loose parts

collection to experiment and explore. Thanksgiving or harvest time may be celebrated with a reading of “A Feast for Ten” and creating a mud feast in the outdoor classroom, including all the special touches for a celebration with decorations, a set table, special dishes, and spices. Read about this approach at tinkergarten.com/activities/fall-feast.

During the winter season, be sure to read many winter-themed loose parts books, such as “Snowballs” by Lois Ehlert. One group used a plastic egg carton filled with loose parts, including glass pebbles, acorns, sticks, and rocks, to decorate their own snow creations. The back matter of the book has a visual list of potential options. As is typical in loose parts exploration, one child used a ladle to form snowballs, which became the perfect meatballs and then formed a hungry caterpillar.

Valentine’s Day-specific loose parts may include frozen pink and purple

hearts, colored water in spray bottles for the snow and options to make hearts out of loose parts. “Monday Hearts for Madalene” by Page Hodel shows a love story of hearts made of found and natural objects such as pencils, berries, buttons, and flowers, which becomes great inspiration for making our own loose parts hearts.

Summertime favorite loose parts-themed books include “How to Code a Sandcastle” by Josh Funk and Sara Palacios and “On My Beach There are Many Pebbles” by Leo Lionni. Even if not close to a beach, children can play and explore with seashells, pebbles, sand, and water. Students can sort by size, shape, color, and texture.

Any holiday can be adjusted just by the color of loose parts. Children also naturally include celebrations as part of their play—in one setting, a group of students made a loose parts birthday cake out of mud and flower petals!

Figure 1

Date	Celebration	Description	Potential Loose Parts
9/23-25	International Fairy Tea Party Day	This open-ended celebration brings imagination and play to the forefront as children consider the concepts of fairies and tea parties. Connect with others around the world who are also celebrating. interactionimagination.com	Mud kitchen/table, natural items, spools, scarves, tea set, peg dolls
10/1	Global Cardboard Challenge	Inspired by Cain’s Arcade, host a cardboard party! Bolster imagination and creativity as you create games or other cardboard creations. cardboardchallenge.com	Cardboard, MakeDo®, paint, markers, tape, age-appropriate cardboard cutters
11/3	International Stonework Play Day	Use rocks to tell stories following a simple process: gather, construct, render, narrate, share!	Rocks, paper, writing utensils
2/1	Global School Play Day	Join classrooms across the globe as they set aside special time for unstructured play! globalschoolplayday.com	Any and all!
6/29	International Mud Day	This special day started after an exchange between children in Nepal and Australia, providing clothes so children could play in the mud. Now children across the world bond over squishing, rolling, and playing in the mud! worldforumfoundation.org	Soil, water, pots, pans, sticks, herbs, utensils

Family Celebrations

Honoring and including our families with celebrations helps grow the family's enthusiastic mindset toward loose parts. Here are a few ideas:

- **Take Home Packs**—One school created loose parts packs to celebrate at home with each family. Each family had similar materials, such as craft sticks and office supplies, that they could create with on their own. A short video was sent electronically to families to help them get in the loose parts mindset and get started on their experimentation. Families were invited to send pictures back to the classroom, and children could chat about their experiences in school. Some schools have specific loose parts kits available for check out.
- **Family Nature Club**—Find a free download to host a family nature club at Nature Explore. These activities are versatile, include loose parts, and can be incorporated as an aftercare nature club or a special celebration for the school. Download materials at natureexplore.org.
- **Family Nights**—Including special days as part of suggested at-home activities allows children and families to choose how they might celebrate with the resources they have available. These ideas can be used at home or as part of family gathering nights in our settings. One option is to use a choice board as inspiration for potential loose parts starting points (but never as ending points!) for family nights. This gives families awkwardly standing around a way to dig in and get to know the outdoor classroom better while they play! Some children choose to stay at one option for most of the night—which is totally fine!

Sharing Loose Parts Celebrations

Loose parts celebrations could also be used as part of community outreach and events. Posting about these special celebrations online can unite us with people around the world celebrating in a similar fashion (See Figure 1). In Indiana, many early childhood educators host community nature play days as part of a state-wide initiative for a week each spring. See details at: indianachildrenandnature.org. Special national and international days connect us with educators and classrooms across the globe. Sharing how we and others celebrate on social media can strengthen those bonds.

Gull et. al (2021) provide a variety of ways to share loose parts celebrations with different audiences, such as through open houses, local fairs, libraries, museums, farmers markets,



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TV channels, newspapers, and newsletters. One class shared how they used loose parts to create chain reactions at the school board meeting—complete with demonstrations. The children were validated in their loose parts explorations, while the school board could see the great hands-on learning that was taking place in classrooms. Think about various settings and venues to share your successful loose parts event.

Setting Up for Successful Celebrations

- Consider using a map and/or planning sheet of the different zones, each featuring special loose parts—this could apply both inside and outside.
- Involve children to choose special days to celebrate, along with

choosing loose parts options and how they will use them.

- Do not let an “activity” get in the way of loose parts. While something may look cute on Pinterest or social media, give the power to explore and experiment to the children, rather than offering a “right” way to create or celebrate. Children always surprise us in a good way with what they create.
- Engaging indoor and outdoor spaces with accessible loose parts lend themselves to children celebrating what they might naturally. Outdoor classrooms are a rich backdrop for engaging loose parts year-round. We have heard reports of “weddings,” complete with décor and scarf dresses in outdoor classrooms! When loose parts are accessible, children can celebrate as much as they want, however they wish.

Celebrating special days and events using loose parts can enhance creativity, problem-solving skills, and collaboration. Establishing a loose parts mindset for special days and seasonal celebrations allows students to explore and share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences with fellow children, families, and communities. “Any day is a great day for a special event and celebration of learning” (Gull et al., 2021).

References

Gull, C., Levenson Goldstein, S., and Rosengarten, T. (2021). *Loose Parts Learning in K-3 Classrooms*. Gryphon House.



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